

CHAPTER ONE

THEATRES and STAGES

Whether actor or technician, your greatest ally in theatre is the *imagination* of your audience. Your job is to trigger that imagination. While this may be done in many ways and by methods of differing quality, the task must be done. To do it efficiently requires at least some knowledge of the vocabulary, facilities, materials, equipment, and techniques available.

The facility will vary greatly from theatre to theatre. The physical plant divides into three basic parts, and each of these can be provided in different forms. Each facility will be a combination of parts, each of which will have its own strengths and weaknesses.

PARTS OF A THEATRE

The primary part of a theatre is its *acting area* — the only one of the parts actually required in order to present a theatre experience. The functions of this part are to set the actor apart from the audience, to divide performance from reality, and to provide a degree of visibility and audibility for the performer. This is the area with which you should be most concerned since it is the focal point of the theatre experience.

The second part of the theatre is the *auditorium* — an area to provide some degree of comfort and safety for the audience, and to allow them to see and hear what is on stage. Some auditoriums are poorly planned and do little to provide these things. The more poorly planned the auditorium, the greater the task of the performer and the technician.

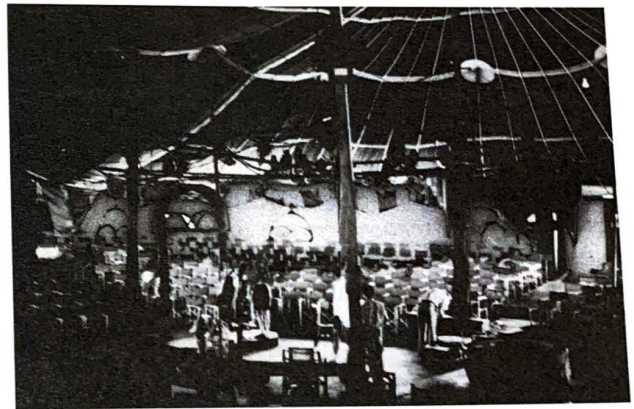
While optional, most theatres provide a *scenic background*. Taking many forms, it may appear as: a curtain, either patterned or plain; a painted backdrop depicting something real or symbolic; a constructed background; or a natural background as provided by many outdoor theatres.

FORMS OF THEATRES

The forms of the acting area are many. While acting areas may be at any elevation in relation to the audience seating they are usually a little above the lowest row provided for the viewers. Theatre forms are usually named according to the amount of

space occupied around the performance area by the audience.

The *theatre-in-the-round* presents actors completely encircled by the audience. In this form of staging, which is also known as *arena*, *circle staging*, or *center staging*, the stage directions are taken from a clock face. An area adjacent to one of the entrance aisles is designated as the location of the technical control equipment and this aisle is then designated as the



Avondale Playhouse

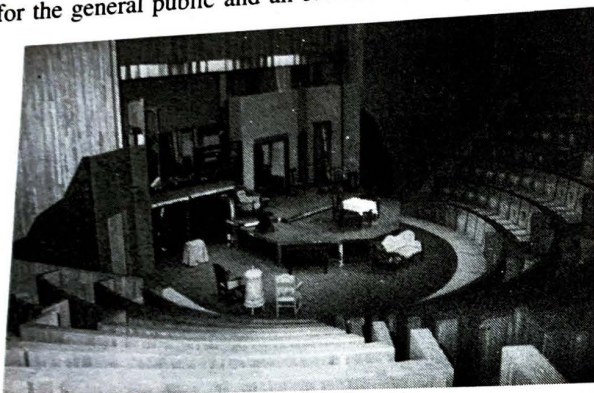
“twelve o’clock” position. Viewed from above the other aisles take on designations as three, six, or nine o’clock. In this way the director can locate actors and scenery by reference to clock face position. While this form of theatre offers the closest actor-audience proximity, it also is probably the most limiting on scenery and lighting equipment placement.

Neither props nor scenic items can be tall enough to limit the vision of any portion of the audience. Lighting equipment used to illuminate the face of a performer standing close to the edge of the performance space at ten o’clock and facing center may easily spill into the eyes of audience members seated close to that edge of the stage.

Obviously there is no limit to how many degrees of wrapping-the-audience-around-the-stage seating are used. For reference, however, theatres fall into categories by quarters. Thus the *three-quarter round* stage has seating around 270 degrees,

while the *half-round* seats through 180 degrees. In either of these forms you can accomplish a closer relationship of actor-to-audience than in other forms, but since there is an area in which sight lines are of no concern, scenery begins to become more flexible.

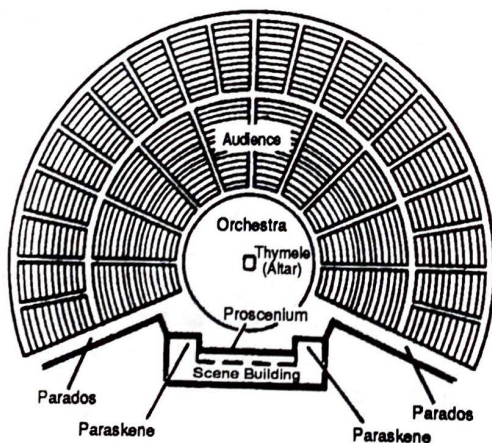
The Greek and Roman theatres which were almost three-quarter and half-round respectively, gave us some of our basic concepts of physical theatre and many of our terms come from them. These early forms shared such things as a seating area for the general public and an *orchestra*, which in the Greek



Christian Theological Seminary

theatre was a performance area used by the chorus. In Roman times it became the seating area for local dignitaries. Side alleyways called *parados* were provided for the Greek chorus to gain entry to the orchestra. Which *parados* they used was symbolic and told the audience whether their trip was nearby or far away.

In the center of the orchestra was a *thymele* or altar which the Greeks used for sacrifices. The Romans reduced this in size, placed it at the front edge of the stage, and used it as a display location for the laurel wreath to be given to the top performer.



Typical Greek Theatre

Each had its *scene building* to provide storage for costumes

and properties. These buildings had *doors* which aided in the dramatic story. One door represented the home of the *protagonist* (hero) while another was the home of the *antagonist* (villain) and the middle door represented a temple which of course was the home of the gods. Alongside the building were *paraskene* — towers added to the sides to make the building a “U” shape. Later a playing area was added to the face of each *paraskene* and these were called *proscenium* — places in front of the scene.

The Greeks were the first to use scenic devices. The *periaktoi* were triangular shaped units which when placed side-by-side formed a flat surface for painted scenery. The shape allowed the units to rotate thus giving simple “shifts” between scenes. In the early days of television some designers used this method to provide quick, visual shifts during musical variety shows. The advertising industry is now using them in outdoor signboards to project three messages off the same billboard.

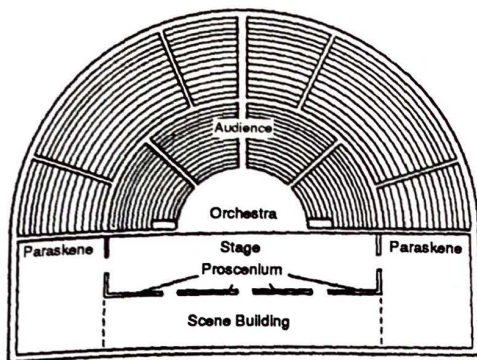
The *eccyclema* was a cart or platform on wheels used to move items on and off the playing area. In the middle ages individual scenes were moved from place to place in the city during festival days. This was done using a *pageant wagon* which had an elevated platform on which the scene was presented to the gathered audience. These were the forerunners of our stage wagons and platforms of today.

The Greeks also used a *deus-ex-machina* or “god of the machine.” It was a means of having a character “descend” onto the stage from the heavens, or was used by the dramatist to rescue a hero from an impossible situation. Since the audience could see the machinery as well as the operation of it, it was very contrived or “faked.” This is the meaning which the term has in its use today. This term would not be used to identify the sophisticated flying normally used in presentations of *Peter Pan* or *Aladdin*.

The Roman theatre gave us a *sounding board* which was a sloped panel above the stage to help project sound into the audience area. It also brought us *awnings* to protect people from the sun during performances and a huge *scene wall* which was an ornately carved permanent facade in front of which the actors performed.

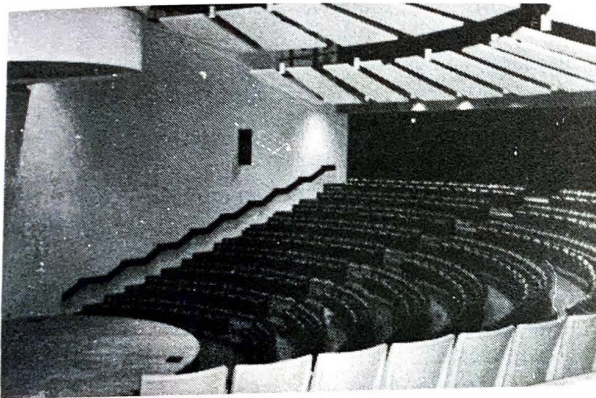
We achieve what is called an *open stage* when the audience seating is restricted to less than 180 degrees and no proscenium is present. There is little structural restriction placed upon the stage or the acting area and the audience is seated as closely as possible to the performance area. This gathering of the audience into less of an arc allows the use of scenic projections and minimal self-standing scenery as major scenic techniques.

If there is some physical, structural limitation placed upon the vision of the audience, the theatre will fall into the *proscenium*



Typical Roman Theatre

category. In the true proscenium theatre the actual presentation takes place behind the curtain line which serves as an imaginary fourth wall. In this form the audience is looking through a picture frame to see the action.

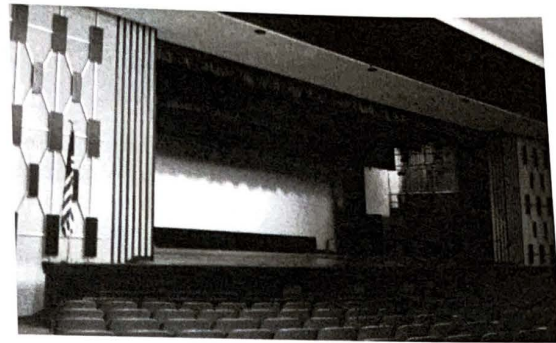


Indianapolis Children's Museum

Some years ago this fourth wall concept was breached and the actors began to play onto the front of the stage, thus allowing them to get as close to their audience as possible, "thrusting" the action toward the audience. Here the action behind the actual proscenium arch becomes less and we find ourselves presenting theatre on a *thrust stage*. The Globe Theatre in Shakespeare's time was a thrust stage.

A number of changes have been used in conjunction with the proscenium. Adding large floor spaces to the sides and in front of the proscenium produces a proscenium stage with *side stages*. This allows directors to have performing spaces close to the audience while keeping such advantages of the proscenium as allowing masked scene changes.

During the middle ages the concept of *multiple staging* was introduced. Guilds, or unions accepted responsibility for presenting a portion of a story for festival day. Often the scenes were erected adjacent to each other so the audience could follow the story by shifting attention along the line of



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scenes. Designers and directors today often have several scenes set on a stage and use lighting and or blocking to focus the attention of the audience. Side stages also provide a method of doing this.

In some theatres the proscenium was widened or eliminated. The playing space often was provided with the rigging and lighting used in the more traditional proscenium stage. This produced what was referred to as the *open stage*.

The *black box* theatre has been around for quite a while. It is, as the name implies, a room which ideally has some sort of lighting grid above and totally flexible seating. The audience may be placed in any configuration desired. This is the most *experimental* type of theatre by providing the fewest space limitations. It does require the most from lighting and from imaginative scenery and props.

As a rule a performer prefers the type of theatre which provides a playing space closest to the audience. The closer the cast is to the audience the more careful the technicians have to be in their work.

Of all forms of theatre it is this author's opinion that the proscenium form of theatre offers the most opportunity to the technician, the actor, and the audience. This is the form of theatre which utilizes the most talents from the technician. Most of the scripts available today were written for this form. Some feel that it is more costly to build and equip than other forms and cite this as a reason for eliminating it, but in the hands of a staff who wishes to be creative a proscenium theatre can easily be transformed into any of the other forms thus allowing experimentation.

The majority of the stages in operation today are proscenium stages and since they offer the greatest opportunity to the technician we will talk mostly of their techniques and equipment in this textbook.

In this era of multi-use concepts we see auditorium spaces using dividers so they can be considered as multi-purpose rooms. It's a popular concept but it can produce a number of

limitations, if not obstacles, to having a facility which will provide the elements needed for acoustic excellence.

STAGE TERMINOLOGY

Stages other than those in theatre-in-the-round must also have a method of indicating directions to the participants. Because early stages were sloped or *raked* (set at an angle to the audience's line of vision) the action farthest away was actually higher than that which was closer. The rear portion of the stage is *up stage* and the area closer to the audience is *down stage*.

Since we are giving directions to persons on stage the reference is made as they face their audience. *Stage left* is designated as the actor's left, while facing the audience, conversely *stage right* is to the actor's right.

By labeling the *center* portion of the stage we have the complete set of words for identifying the basic acting areas. The nine basic areas of the stage are designated by using the word indicating up or down first, then left or right, and finally center when required.

Between the stage and the audience there is usually some form of *apron*. This is the portion of the stage floor between the main curtain and the front edge of the stage. Its size will vary from nothing to larger-than-stage area as found in a thrust stage.

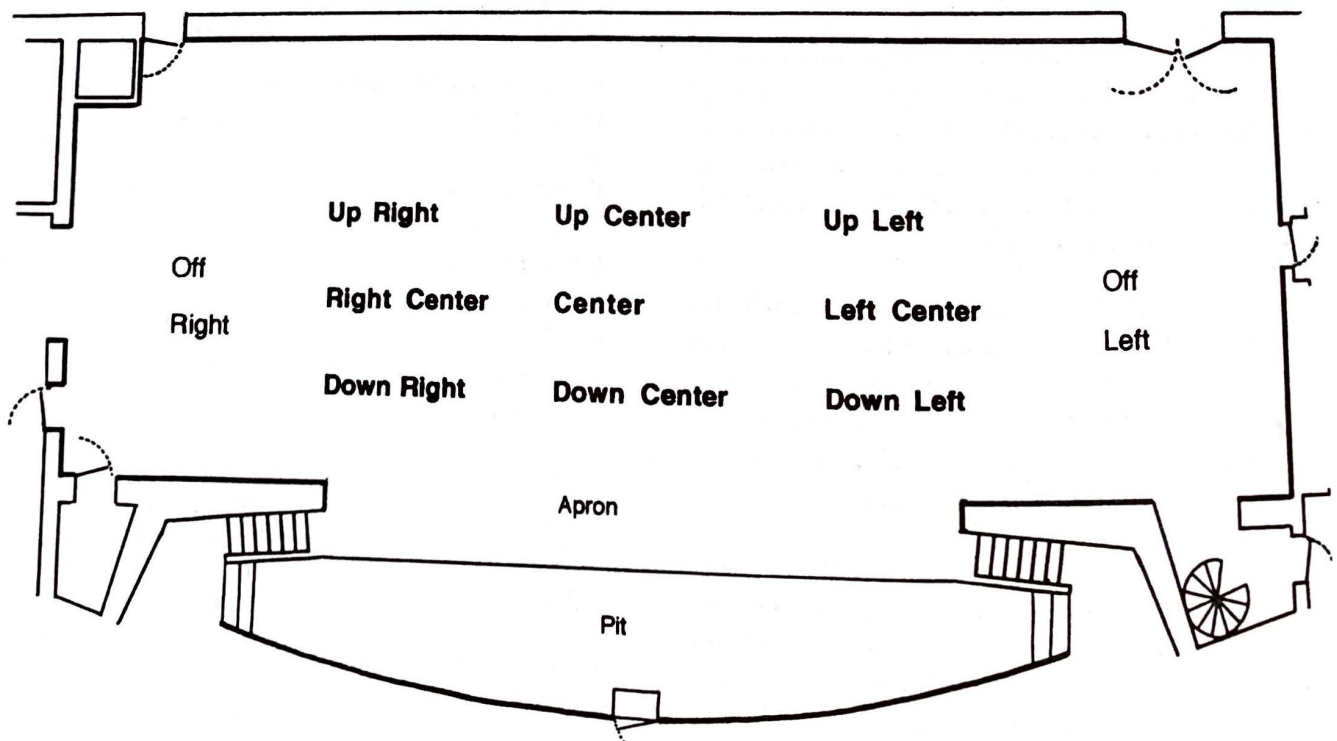
Most proscenium type stages also provide an area between the apron and the audience for the location of musicians. This is the *pit* and may be nothing more than a floor area without audience seating, or might be an elevator floor which allows

elevation adjustment from stage floor level down to lower levels. Some of these pits are so small that they become more of a limitation than a useable area. Others are so large that the audience in the first row feels a great separation from the action. In the "up" position, the pit provides a thrust stage to overcome this feeling of distance. If the lift, which is very expensive, is nonexistent, then fillers can be used to bridge the pit space.

Since the members of a musical group in the pit would be considered as part of the presentation on stage, the stage directions usually are used through the pit. At the pit wall we begin to deal with the audience which is facing the stage, thus the directions from this point out begin to relate to the orientation of the viewing public.

The proscenium form stage with its associated rigging is the most complex of the forms. It contains some items which are unique to it while it shares some things with other forms. Its name is derived from the picture frame opening which allows the audience to look in on the action while it blocks off a view of the supporting mechanisms and personnel.

An imaginary line drawn across the stage even with the backside of this arch will form the *curtain line* or plaster line. Centered in the proscenium opening and drawn from the front to the rear of the stage is the *center line*. It is from these two reference lines that locations for sets, lighting and curtains are measured. Standard stage directions are used then to relate locations for purposes of movement. Some houses will establish a curtain line up stage of the edge of the arch, perhaps to clear some permanent obstruction. The exact location does not matter; it is only important that the line be decided upon to prevent technical confusion.



The *flooring* of a stage is often ignored. This material is very much a part of the technical work and can be either an aid or a hindrance. As an aid it will allow the technician to attach scenery, place pivots for wagons, locate marks for the placement of scenery and will be dark enough not to reflect much light.

The up stage two-thirds of a proscenium or thrust stage floor needs to provide a means of attaching scenery. Quarter-sawn *fir* is preferable because of its close, firm grain while it is soft enough to allow penetration by nails, screws, or other attachment devices. It has the capability to absorb a lot of punishment and recover somewhat. Flooring material, like other technical items, can be expected to wear out and have to be replaced.

In the down stage portion and apron, *maple* flooring provides the resonance to enhance some sound from dancing. It is also a hard-to-damage surface. This portion of the floor especially should have the space below filled with some sort of insulation material to deaden the echo sound. Ideally the entire floor will be thus insulated.

Some years ago attempts were made to utilize linoleum for stage floors. The attempts met with some degree of success in spite of the instability of the early large-sheet flooring materials. Recently linoleum-like materials have been developed which will allow them to be used for either permanent installation, or for roll-up portable flooring. Such flooring answers the problems created by the earlier ground cloths used when a designer wanted to paint the floor for a show, yet allows traction for dancers and a firm enough surface that scenery can be rolled over it.

The finish of the stage floor also is important. To allow the lighting technician better control of the light the floor should be finished in a dark color and matte finish. This will eliminate much of the reflection and thus provide better light control. Unfortunately, you will find that dust is usually reflective.

The termination of the audience's sight is the rear "wall" of the stage. Often this is a neutral material used to indicate sky. The material may be a temporary fabric curtain or a permanent textured plaster or sprayed concrete wall. It may be flat or may curve in one or more planes. Regardless of shape or material, it must still produce illusion. Usually this is referred to as the "cyc" or cyclorama.

To aid the lighting technician, the best color for the cyc is a slightly blued gray. This allows a maximum of color changes through the use of lighting. If it is a painted surface, then the paint used should be flat so as to cut down the glare reflected to the audience.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

B - 16, 23, 25, 27,

P - 1, 3, 5, 6

GLOSSARY

acting area 1
 antagonist 2
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 arena 1
 auditorium 1
 awnings 3
 black box 3
 center 4
 center line 4
 center staging 1
 circle staging 1
 curtain line 4
 cyc 5
 deus-ex-machina 2
 doors 2
 down stage 4
 eccyclema 2
 experimental 3
 fir 5
 flooring 5
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 imagination 1
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 multiple staging 3
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 parados 2
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 periaktoi 2
 pit 4
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 protagonist 2
 raked 4
 scene building 2
 scene wall 2
 scenic background 1
 side stages 3
 sounding board 2
 stage left 4
 stage right 4
 theatre-in-the-round 1
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